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**Testimony of
Leslie J. Gabel-Brett, Ph.D.
Executive Director
Permanent Commission on the Status of Women
Before the
Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee
Tuesday, February 14, 2006**

**RE: R.B. 5024, An Act Concerning the Workforce Readiness of the Jobs First
Program Participants**

Good afternoon Sen. Hartley, Rep. Willis and members of the committee. My name is Leslie Gabel-Brett and I am the Executive Director of the Permanent Commission on the Status of Women. Thank you for this opportunity to testify in favor of R.B. 5024, An Act Concerning the Workforce Readiness of the Jobs First Program Participants.

The Permanent Commission on the Status of Women sees this proposed bill as one of the most important legislative initiatives of the session because it addresses a persistent, unsolved problem and offers a path out of poverty for low-income families receiving Temporary Family Assistance (TFA). As you may recall, this committee supported a very similar bill last year that did not reach the finish line to become law. This year, the proposal is more modest in that it would establish only a *pilot* program to offer effective adult basic education services such as literacy and numeracy education to a limited number of participants in the Jobs First Employment Services program. The program would be evaluated during the two-year pilot to determine whether participants

were better able to increase their literacy, earn a high school diploma or GED, and secure employment with a decent wage.

According to the CT Department of Labor, more than a third of the 8,700 people in the time-limited Jobs First program do not have a high school diploma.¹ Yet without a high school diploma, it is nearly impossible to secure a job. If we want to unlock the door for these parents and their children, we must invest in basic education including literacy, numeracy and English as a Second Language, and provide skill training in occupations that lead to employment and wages sufficient to gain economic security. The pilot program proposed in this bill is also a sound investment in our state's economy because businesses across the state need workers with good basic skills.

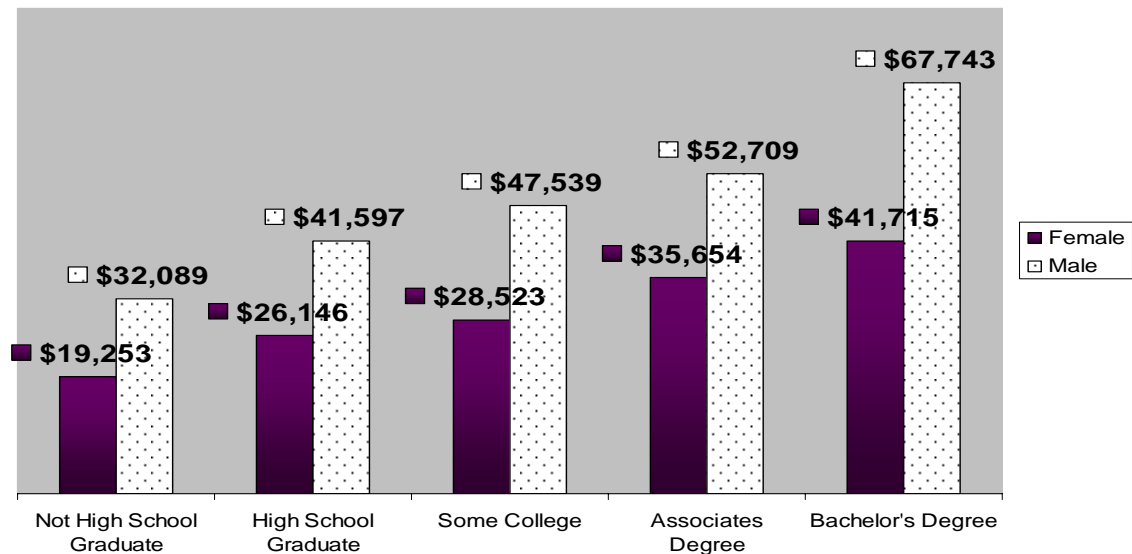
The proposed bill includes four components:

- First, it requires the Department of Labor to do a more thorough assessment of Jobs First recipients who lack a high school diploma or who have low literacy or math skills. We cannot help recipients overcome barriers to employment if we do not have enough information about what those barriers are. Moreover, if we do an inadequate job of assessing recipients, we will waste public dollars on programs that will not work.
- Second, it requires the DOL to provide basic education to some Jobs First participants including literacy, numeracy and ESL, and vocational education programs that integrate basic education in them. There is considerable research that shows that adult learners are more likely to succeed if reading and other basic skills are taught within the context of job training and employment opportunities, rather than in a traditional classroom. In addition, models that combine education with work will help Connecticut meet its participation requirements under the federal TANF law and help recipients make a successful attachment to the labor force.
- Third, it requires the providers of these basic vocational education programs to report on how many recipients enter and complete these programs, how many gain employment and what wages they earn.
- Fourth, the proposed bill allows DSS to grant an additional extension of time to participants who are in an adult basic education or skills training program that is part of their approved Employment Plan. We know that some participants need more time to learn to read or to learn a job skill and, as long as they are participating in good faith and making progress, we should avoid wasting their efforts and public dollars by simply cutting them off too soon.
- Fifth, the bill proposes to re-allocate \$3 million of TANF funds to fund the pilot program over two years.

¹ *At-A-Squint, Jobs First Employment Services Participants Served by CTWorks, September 2005.*

The State of Connecticut receives approximately \$267 million of TANF funds from the federal government, and is required to match it with \$184 million in state “maintenance of effort” (MOE) funds, for a total \$461 million in our state budget that must be spent to assist “needy families.” Out of \$461 million, only \$16 million is currently allocated for the Jobs First program, and the majority of that amount is spent on case management and “job readiness” activities. As much as \$131 million of the TANF and MOE money is allocated to a category labeled “other” in the state’s reports to the federal government and includes spending for DCF, SDE and other state agencies. However, we believe that when TANF funds are spent to increase the education – and therefore the employability – of parents, we can prevent the need to spend more money on child welfare and other emergency services that result when families can’t meet their basic needs. That is why spending \$3 million on adult education and skill training is a good investment.

The link between education and training and economic success is clear:



According to U.S. Census data for Connecticut, the difference between having a high school diploma or equivalent and not having one is worth, on average, \$7,000 per year in wages for women. Obtaining a two-year Associate’s degree is worth more than \$9,000 more per year.²

We urge you to support this pilot program. Connecticut needs educated and skilled workers, and welfare recipient needs an opportunity to lift themselves and their families out of poverty. Thank you.

² U.S. Census, Current Population Survey, 2003

